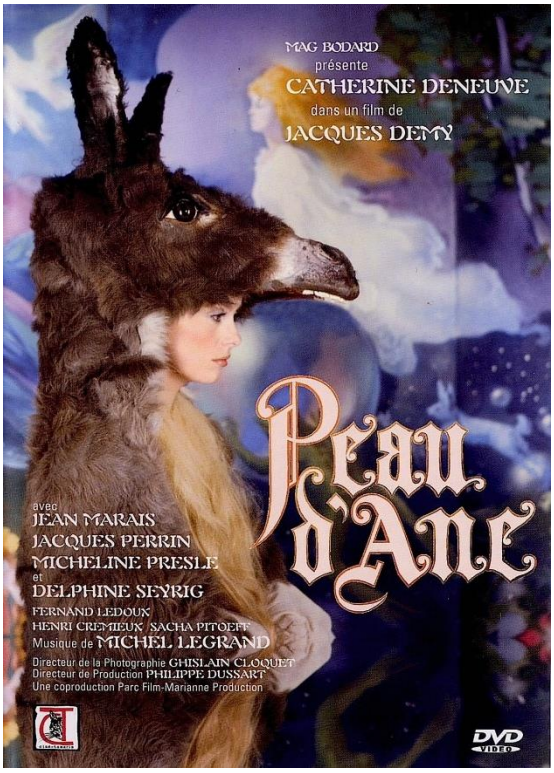
The Colors of Desire in Jacques Demy's Peau d'Âne



In 1970, Jacques Demy released Donkey Skin, a film that appears at first glance to belong entirely to the world of childhood fantasy. Adapted from seventeeth-century fairy tale by Charles Perrault, the film tells the story of a princess who flees her kingdom disguised beneath a donkey's hide in order to escape an impossible marriage imposed by her own father. Yet beneath its magical surfaces, vibrant customes and musical charm lies a complex cinematic work that reflects the artistic ambitions of post French New Wave cinema. Rather than offering simple escapism, Donkey Skin transforms the fairy tale into a modern exploration of identity, desire and cinematic artifice.

Unlike traditional fairy tale adaptations that aim for illusionistic realism, Demy embraces artificiality as central aesthetic principle. The castles shimmer with unreal colors, forests appear theatrical rather than natural and dialog move effortlessly between sincerity and playful irony. This stylization aligns the film with creative freedom that emerged from the French New Wave, a movement that encouraged filmmakers to challenge cinematic conventions and rethink storytelling itself. Demy does not attempt to make fantasy believable in a realistic sense. Instead, he invites the viewer to accept cinema as a space of imagination where artifice becomes truth. The film openly acknowledged its constructed world, reminding audiences that fantasy is not an escape from reality but another way of interpreting it.

Color plays a fundamental narrative role throughout the film. Rather than functioning as decoration, color structures emotional meaning and character transformation. The princess's legendary dresses, representing the colors of the sun, the moon and the sky, symbolize unattainable ideals imposed upon her by royak expectations. These costumes are excessive and luminous, transforming the character into an object of spectale within the court. When she later hides beneath the donkey skin,

the visual contrast becomes striking. The brilliance of royalty is replaced by dirt, humanity and anonymity. Through this transformation, Demy uses custome to externalize psychological change. Identity is revealed not as fixed but as something perfomed and negotiated through appearance.

The theme of disguise lies at the emotional core of Donkey Skin. Forced to flee patriarchal authority, the princess reclaims agency through concealment rather than confrontation. Her disguise allow her to exist outside social hierarchies, moving from princess to servant and ultimately to an individual defined by her own desire rather than imposed roles. In this sense, transformation becomes liberation. Demy reframes the fairy tale's magical elements as metaphors personal autonomy. The fantastical narrative thus reflects modern concerns about gender, power and self-definition, themes increasingly explored in European cinema during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Music further reinforces the film's dreamlike atmosphere. Songs interrupt narrative realism and suspend time, allowing emotions to be expressed directly rather than psychological explained. This musical structure creates a space between reality and imagination where characters articulate longing, fear and hope. Demy's approach recalls classical Hollywood musicals while simultaneously maintaining the introspective tone associated with auteur cinema. The result is a hybrid from that merges popular entertainment with artistic experimentation.

Although released after the peak years of the French New Wave, Donkey Skin embodies its spirit through freedom of form and personal vision. Demy demonstrates that innovation does not require realism or political directness. Instead, he suggests that fantasy itself can be radical. By revisiting a centuries-old story, he reveals how myths continue to evolve alongside contemporary anxieties. The

film’s enchanted world becomes a mirror reflecting questions of identity and transformation relevant to modern audiences.

Above all, Peau d’Âne endures it refuses to separate innocence from complexity. Its pastel colors and musical charm conceal deeper reflections on desire, autonomy and the power of imagination. Through stylization, costume and narrative transformation, Demy redefines the fairy tale as a cinematic language capable of expressing modern subjectivity. The film reminds us that fantasy is not opposed to reality but offers another path toward understanding it. In Demy’s hands, enchantment becomes a form of a cinematic truth.